

Connectedness

Bridging the gap between values and practice in developing a safe and supportive school community

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Introduction

For the sake of this discussion, it is suggested that there exists a paradox within the teaching profession: one found in most schools. On one hand educators know and believe that students need role models and that almost every aspect of teaching, even (or especially) including discipline—is all about relationships. Yet on the other hand we know that our school pays us to teach—we're not there to be a friend. The teacher's job is to teach and the student's job is to learn. Teachers acknowledge a duty of pastoral care and that every student should have a trusted teacher to speak to in time of need. However, they don't have time to chat with students and if something is wrong, the preferred option is to send them to the chaplain or the counsellor. On one hand teaching is relational, pastoral—some may even see teaching as a ministry. Yet on the other hand, school is about classroom management, teaching and learning, timetables and assessment. Both concepts are correct. Both are a descriptors of a good teacher, yet one tends to be seen as an ideal and the other as functional reality.

Educators want to make teaching about relationships and building a sense of community, but the reality is that a school is a busy place—there is material to cover, assignments to monitor and assessments to be made. There are playground duties, staff meetings, sports training, field trips, detentions, class preparation, roll marking, risk assessments, lesson plans and a dozen other little things that have to happen almost every day. Sometimes the goal of teaching as a 'noble profession' has to be patient and wait its turn, while we deal with the reality and demands of school life.

Few schools would deny that one of their core values is that of a vibrant, interactive, supportive and relational school community. Yet the timetable and job expectations don't often reflect it. Professional development opportunities tend to have an academic focus. Pastoral care time is juggled with assemblies and chapels around the academic timetable.

Teachers have precious few spare periods to get things done at school, and the rest gets squeezed in at lunch breaks or taken home. Schools are busy places; our primary emphasis is on teaching and learning; teachers are busy at school, after school and on the weekends; and the addressing of issues relating to relationships and school community have to fit in to very small time slots.

Teachers want schools to be places of community, connection and belonging—but the demands of daily school life mean that those values don't always get the priority desired.

Research

There is a substantial amount of research relating to the importance of this sense of school belonging or connectedness to an adolescent. Although the terms used as descriptors vary, the research consensus is that students who see their school as a place where they belong to a community do better in a number of documented areas. Researchers (Schaps, Knopf, Hanson and Muller, 2005) state that:

Connectedness, belongingness, and community all refer to students' sense of being in close, respectful relationships with peers and adults at school. These terms are used interchangeably here since they all refer to students' sense of being in close, respectful relationships with peers and adults in school or of being contributing and influential members of the school. (p. 40)

So regardless of whether the term is connectedness, a sense of belonging or building community (all of which are worth considering), the research is clear that when it is a characteristic of a school, the students do better.

Students' academic and social-emotional and behavioural successes are interdependent. When students have positive academic self-esteem and feel safe in school, their potential to be academically engaged and successful increases." (Schaps, Knopf, Hanson & Muller, 2005, p. 9)

American research shows that students who feel connected or have a sense of belonging to their school are less likely to use drugs, be depressed,

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demonstrate violent behaviour or become pregnant (Lonczak, Abbott, Hawkins, Kosterman, & Catalano, 2002; Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 1998). They are less likely to miss school without reason, be involved in fighting, bullying or vandalism (Schapps, 2003; Wilson & Elliott, 2003). They are more likely to succeed academically and finish school (Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995; Wentzel, 1998). A supportive school environment is associated with less substance abuse and other problem behaviours (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill 1999; Battistich & Hom 1997; Resnick, et al., 1997) and students in a supportive environment have more positive views of themselves and more prosocial attitudes towards others (Schapps, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997).

In 2003 an invitational conference was convened at the Wingspread Conference Centre in Racine, Wisconsin, attracting leading researchers and contributors from across psychological, educational and sociological fields to identify the current state of knowledge in this area. The end product of the conference was a document (Wingspread Declaration of School Connectedness, 2004) which concluded that a sense of belonging to their school was associated with reduced health-risk behaviours, increased school engagement, better socio-emotional peer relationships, and better general educational achievement.

In Australia, one study that examined mental health problems in young people (Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006) found a strong association with the perception of connectedness at school and adolescent depressive symptoms. The researchers suggested that school connectedness was one of strongest safety factors, even above that of the family home, to guard against depression (Shochet, I. M., Smyth, T., & Homel, R. (in press), p. 3).

In summary, the research is clear and overwhelming that regardless of the terms of reference, those 'community related' values described in our suggested paradox are important. They have implications beyond religious or moral affects, to the point of being essential not only to academic achievement, but student safety and well being. A thorough review of available literature might even conclude that it would be negligent *not* to show an intentional, demonstrable strategy for building these values into the whole school program and particularly the timetable.

Refining parameters

If the research is convincing, it is also fairly nebulous in that there are no common or absolute terms of reference, let alone a prescriptive course of action

for a school to follow in an attempt to provide that sometimes elusive sense of belonging desired for our students.

However whether the term School Connectedness (and focus on the student's perception of their school experience) is used, or the delivery of pastoral care (from a staffing and program delivery perspective) is reviewed, or the relational aspects of the school community (from an organisational viewpoint) are considered, there are some aspects of school culture that are commonly mentioned across research literature.

Libbey (2004) identified nine areas of school life that were shown as having direct impact on a sense of connectedness: 1) high academic expectations and engagement, 2) a sense of belonging, 3) a perception of fairness in the application of discipline, 4) the availability of and engagement in extracurricular activities, 5) a feeling of pride and general 'liking' of their school, 6) the presence of a student voice in school related decision making, 7) positive peer relations, 8) a feeling of safety, and 9) the perception of teacher support.

These areas are consistent with other measures (Resnick, et al., 1997; Moody & Bearman, 1998; and McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002), and provide a useful outline for an initial consideration of how a school might begin to formulate an action plan towards a more connected school community. If our introductory paradox has any likeness to the reality of our schools—where the core value of a connected school community is not matched to the practice of daily school life; and if the research suggesting that the successful implementation of those same values will not only increase academic performance but also increase both the physical and emotional health of our students, then it would seem prudent to examine a potential course of action.

Asking questions

While noting that the nine identified areas above are consistent with research literature, but not assumed to be totally comprehensive, consider what an approach to building a more connected school community might look like. In the absence of a more authoritative directive, ask a few 'audit' questions in each area. Choose what may apply to your school community and begin to consider the potential for building a sense of connectedness.

1. High academic expectations and engagement

Are students motivated to do well? Do their teachers believe they can do well? Even more importantly, do the students believe that their teachers believe they

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can achieve? Do all students do homework? Is there a reporting measure of student effort or application apart from achievement? Is there a process for identifying and supporting students who are not achieving to their ability?

2. A sense of belonging

*Research literature suggests that 'a sense of belonging' may be **the** most significant factor for school connectedness.* Does every student feel like they 'belong' in this community? What pastoral care structures are in place to give students the opportunity to belong? Does every student have a teacher who *they* believe cares about them personally? Are there multiple ways for students to seek support when they are struggling with belonging at school? Are the avenues of support for students clearly communicated to both students and their parents? Do all teachers see it as their personal responsibility to make students feel welcome at school and to care for those students who don't? Is there a proactive approach to helping students feel included rather than only reactive interventions for those who may be struggling?

3. A perception of fairness in the application of discipline

Are the behaviour standards consistently applied by all teachers? Is there a whole school discipline approach? Is the discipline policy and subsequent consequences for the disregard of the policy clearly communicated to students and parents? Does the discipline policy encourage students to take responsibility for their actions? Does the discipline policy encourage teachers to build relationships with students in the process of consequence and reconciliation?

4. The availability of and engagement in extracurricular activities

Does the school have an active and varied program of extra-curricular activity? Are the activities that happen before and after school available to all students? Is there a timetable of extra-curricular activity? Is it created so that students are not overloaded or pressured to participate in one at the expense of another?

5. A feeling of pride and general 'liking' of their school

Are students proud of their school? Is there a sense of school spirit? Do students wear their uniform with pride? Does the school have a good reputation in the community? Does the school promote its strengths to students and the wider community? On

another train of thought, is there a sense of 'fun' in the school? Are there times in the regular school day where students and teachers laugh together?

6. The presence of a student voice in school related decision making

Do students feel that they have a voice concerning decisions that impact them? Do students have representation at a decision making level? Do senior students have meaningful leadership roles within the school community? Is there a clear avenue for complaint or discussion regarding issues raised by the student body? Is there an avenue of approach for students to address higher administration regarding school issues?

7. Positive peer relations

Is there a structure for interpersonal, relationship and resilience education within the curriculum? Are positive friendships and relationship skills promoted within the school community? Are there multiple avenues of support available for students struggling with friendship issues? Are there effective peer support programs and peer mentoring structures and opportunities available to students?

8. A feeling of safety

Can every student feel safe in every social interaction area of the school at lunch times or before and after school? Does the school deal effectively with bullying and harassment? Is the process for reporting bullying promoted and communicated consistently during the school year? Are students confident that if they speak up about a bullying or personal safety issue, their concerns will be addressed immediately, effectively and respectfully?

9. The perception of teacher support

Do teachers like their students? *This is the most common measure in research literature on school connectedness.* Do students believe that their teachers like them? If they have a problem, are students confident their teachers will help them? Do students care what their teachers think of them? Do teachers praise their students in class? Are students comfortable interacting with teachers within the school community? Does every student have one teacher who is looking out for their welfare?

Conclusion

Regardless of whether there is an actual disconnect between the relational and community values of a school and the practice of delivering education, there is still significant research to suggest that students who feel more connected to their school

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community will do better emotionally, physically and academically. The Wingspread Declaration (2004) made a clear statement that

...some contend the business of school is teaching for knowledge acquisition and that attention to the non-academic aspects of school are a low priority. However, the health and education literature suggests these factors contribute significantly to school success. (p.282)

The overwhelming evidence is that students who feel like they belong to a connected school community will benefit from that sense of connectedness. The not so subtle inference is that an intentional focus on those aspects of school culture that contribute to such a community will be a practical and effective path towards values based education. **TEACH**

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